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ABSTRACT

A study of the preferences of 49 college honors students enrolled in a basic speech-communication course demonstrated that current teaching practices in honors courses do not match the students' optimal learning styles. The students answered questions about their expectations and experiences in an honors speech-communication course and 25 of them completed the Grasha-Reichman Questionnaire which assesses learning styles. Results indicated that students were interested in improving skills, not just learning theory. While the results also indicated that the students preferred collaborative and participant styles, most teachers use independent or dependent methods. Teaching approaches can be adapted to promote collaboration and participation by using activities such as conflict group role-playing, dyadic encounters, problem-solving groups, group critique of a demonstration speech, and team debate. (Four tables of data are included, and an appendix of learning style definitions is attached.) (MHC)

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HONORS STUDENTS AND A BASIC SPEECH-COMMUNICATION COURSE:

TECHNIQUES FOR MEETING THEIR NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

HONORS STUDENTS AND A BASIC SPEECH-COMMUNICATION COURSE:

TECHNIQUES FOR MEETING THEIR NEEDS

Although academic excellence is a popular topic today, the communication discipline has neglected to study ways to educate honors students in the basic course. This paper reports the results of a case study designed to measure the expectations of honors students in a basic speech-communication course and to identify their learning styles. Two learning styles predominated: 1) participant, and 2) collaborative. These styles contradict the typical stereotypes of honors students. Several suggestions for instructional exercises suitable for the predominant learning styles are provided. (81 words)

KEY CONCEPTS: Honors, speech-communication, basic course

HONORS STUDENTS AND A BASIC SPEECH-COMMUNICATION COURSE: TECHNIQUES FOR MEETING THEIR NEEDS

Academic excellence is a popular topic today. Commissions on both the high school and university level have conducted extensive research on ways to improve the quality of education. Ironically, the research seems to have neglected one important population of students-- honors students. Austin (1986) comments, "After sixty years of nationally organized professional attention to the honors movement, only a limited consensus exists about the most effective ways of assuring honors education" (p. 5). Currently many honors students do not feel challenged by their education as Friedman (1986) reports in his comprehensive book on honors education: "The best students do not feel challenged by many of their college courses, and little agreement exists among faculty regarding how these students ought to be educated" (p. 1). Friedman offers a reason for the lack of consensus: "Diversity...prevails," he says, "because determining objectively the best ways to educate top students is extremely difficult, if not impossible. We can study scientifically what learning principles and teaching techniques work well for remedial or average students much more

easily then we can methods that apply to the above average group" (p. 2). Furthermore, honors programs experience high drop-out rates. Austin (1975) says that, "...the freshman year is seen as an introduction to honors work for a relatively large number of students, perhaps 10-15 percent of the entering class, whereas at commencement it will be found that no more than 1-2 percent will have chosen to complete a full honors education" (p. 166).

Gabelnick (1986), in her assessment of honors education in the 1980's recognizes that progress has been made in understanding how students make meaning of their world. Techniques have been formulated to enhance cognitive development. Gabelnick states that, "...measures for identifying different learning styles have helped educators to recognize that all students, regardless of intellectual capacity, approach learning tasks in different ways" (p. 85). Styles have been developed, but they have not been applied to honors students. This paper reports the findings of a case study. Learning styles of honors students in an honors speech-communication class were measured. With these as a base, ways to best accomodate these learning styles are suggested.

Methodology

A survey of two honors classes was conducted. One class was asked to respond to the following question: "Now that you have completed an honors section of IPCO (Interpersonal and Public Communication) 102, comment on how this course reflected the goals of the honors program." Twenty-four students responded to this question on a blank sheet of paper. All received ten points of credit on the final exam for completing the question; the papers were anonymous and were collected before the students started the exam. The second class was asked on the first day of an IPCO 102 honors class to respond to the following question: "As an honors student, what do you hope to gain from the honors 102 course that will help foster the goals of the honors program?" Twenty-five students responded to the question on a blank sheet of paper without listing a name.

The second group also completed the Grasha-Reichman Questionnaire, designed to measure learning styles of students. The Grahsa-Reichman Questionnaire was developed in 1975 at the University of Cincinnati and is included, with an explanation of each learning style, in Appendix A. Students completed the ninety-item survey during the last thirty minutes

of a class. The Questionnaire divides learning styles into six categories: independent, avoidance, collaborative, dependent, competitive, and participant. Different teaching techniques are suggested for each learning style. Students were asked to make an identification mark (personal code) on the paper for later identification. No names or social security numbers were allowed to protect the identity of students.

Results

Table 1 indicates the results from students who had completed the honors 102 course. The items are listed in decending order of frequency. The number in the right-hand column indicates the frequency of appearance of the comment from the twenty-four students.

Table 1

BENEFIT	FREQUENCY
student interaction/social development	14
intellectual challenge	13
small group exercises	10
creativity/individuality	9
atmosphere/students at same level	7
confidence from public speaking	5
emotional development	4
time management	3
focused work in the field	2
motivation	2
competition	1

This table indicates that honors students mention the social benefits more frequently than the academic challenges. Since the honors 102 course is a hybrid course with emphasis on interpersonal, small group, and public speaking settings, perhaps the benefits to be expected from the course would be interactional benefits.

Table 2 contains the results from students on the first day of an honors 102 course. Twenty-five students responded to provide the data base, with the most frequent responses listed at the top of the table.

Table 2

BENEFIT	FREQUENCY
increase public speaking skills	14
increase interpersonal/practical skills	13
increase group communication skills	10
challenge/reward	7
to get to know other students	5
control nervousness	3
open relationship with instructor	2
participate more	2
lively class that is full of energy	2
learn to evaluate skills of others	1
learn to win arguments	1

The results indicate that students are interested in improving skills--not just learning theory. Also, students indicate a high interest in practical skills or social-interaction skills.

Table 3 indicates the results of the Grasha-Reichman Questionnaire administered to twenty-four honors students during the third week of the 102 course.

Table 3

LEARNING STYLE	AVERAGE SCORE
Participant	63
Collaborative	62
Dependent	52
Independent	49
Competitive	39
Avoidance	27

Results of the Grasha-Reichman Questionnaire indicate that students in this honors section have two main learning styles: collaborative and participant. The lowest ranked learning styles are avoidance and competitive.

This finding suggests that the learning styles of honors students can best be accomodated by small, seminar-style classes and teaching techniques that promote group interaction. Results indicate that honors students like to think and share their thoughts, opinions, and ideas with others. It appears that they need to be challenged by being actively involved in the learning process with their peers.

While the ratings for the avoidance learning style could be expected to be low, the low ranking for the competitive style was a surprise. Honors students are generally viewed as highly competitive, especially with respect to grades. Research indicates that setting an environment that is highly competitive is unlikely to maximize the learning potential of honors students. This result may indicate that honors students are not striving to beat others, just to maximize their own potential.

Table 4 indicates the number of first-place rankings for each learning style based on a comparison of all six scores for each student.

Table 4

LEARNING STYLE	FIRST PLACE RANKINGS
Collaborative	12
Participant	12
Independent	1
Avoidance	0
Competitive	0
Dependent	0

The results are equally divided between collaborative and participant learning styles. One student had equal scores for both independent and collaborative styles, indicating that the student's ratings, out of seventy-five possible points, were the same for both styles.

Implications

Research implications are grouped into two areas: 1) The first pertains to honors students in general: 2) The other pertains to teaching methods in speech-communication honors classes.

While many honors students have an independent, book-worm stereotype, the results indicate they prefer interaction with peers and the development of social-interaction skills. Waggoner (1963) reports the findings of a study on perceptions of honors students claiming that they "...are viewed as being more critical, argumentative, egotistical, fault-finding, lonely, irritable, moody, sarcastic, rigid, nervous, and annoying. They are considered less: friendly, humorous, tolerant, sympathetic, and charming" (p. 50). The stereotype of honors students indicates that others perceive them as lacking in the skills that a hybrid speech-communication course would strive to develop.

The results demonstrate that honors students want the social benefits of a basic speech-communication course and these benefits may be more important than academic benefits. Perhaps honors students are expressing an intent to change the stereotype of an honors student and

would welcome any learning environment that allows them to develop social-interaction skills to a greater extent, while still providing an academic challenge. Maybe they have always preferred a social-interaction learning environment, but their preferences have never been measured. By selecting teaching techniques to match learning styles of honors students, instructors can create effective learning experiences.

Ironically, the stereotypes of honors students did not appear in the results of the learning-style questionnaire. Honors students did not rate the independent learning style highly, while most honors programs promote independent study as a way to meet the needs of honors students. Austin (1986) reports the overall goal of honors education when he states that an "honors education is usually capped by an individual research experience that culminates in a senior thesis and an oral examination" (p. 8). He continues by explaining how independent study is currently encouraged: "The mainstay of departmental honors is independent study in a tutorial relationship with a faculty member....Several universities now support the research project by awarding undergraduate research scholarships or grants" (p. 9). Community colleges are also taking the same approach to

honors education as Austin continues: "Honors programs in the two-year colleges tend to parallel those in the first two years of a four-year institution with the single exception that independent study in a tutorial relationship with a faculty member may occur in the sophomore rather than the senior year" (p. 11). Friedman (1986) expresses the current attitude toward independent study and honors students when he states that, "Students' maturation can be conceived as progressing from dependent to independent scholarship....They no longer need to be taught in class-size groups where they must move at the majority's pace. Independent work frees the most able and committed individuals to achieve all they can. Consequently, it is an especially apt medium for fostering excellence" (p. 87). Further, Friedman suggests that independent study should be the goal of honors education, while the research on learning styles indicates that it is not a preferred learning mode for honors students.

Even in honors education that is not dependent on independent study, we find that teaching methods would relate best to students with dependent learning styles--a style not rated highly by honors students. Gabelnick

(1986) explains that, "The two most common types of honors courses are accelerated classes and special sections....They [accelerated classes] cover more material at a faster rate. Special honors sections...vary tremendously among the disciplines and among institutions' (p. 81). Briad (1987) states: "No doubt the truth is that few courses, even in honors are radically different from most curriculum or teaching on our campuses" (p. 15). Braid explains her conclusion when she states that, "Super-sections often are organized so that instructors present what is to be learned--that is, perpetuate a passive model or foster a mimic-model of learning--because they are identical to other sections of the same course, only aimed at a presumed better or quicker-witted student....The most commonly practiced mode of teaching is still the lecture,...pitched to multiple levels of sophistication...at times coupled with what most faculty at large institutions call the recitation section" (p. 15). As a result, teaching techniques of honors students primarily foster learning styles not rated highest by them: independent and dependent.

Furthermore, sections currently labeled as discussion often do not use teaching techniques suggested by participant and collaborative learning

styles. Braid (1987) explains that, "In the main, even somewhat smaller courses follow the recitation model: instructors ask questions which are meant to elicit specific, already known and expected answers. Once the answer is formulated, the whole group moves on to the next question. The model here is of a fixed body of information to be collected and exhibited at regular intervals when it can be tested for its rightness or wrongness. Ironically, such sessions are, in the social sciences often known as discussion sections" (p. 15). These teaching techniques are likely to continue because of the existing attitudes of faculty members. Braid explains that "what National Collegiate Honors Council members have learned from their own small encounter with these matters is that faculty teach honors super-sections the way they teach other courses also because by and large faculty do not really believe that discursive teaching can produce informed students or serious scholars. Most have had little exposure to skillful seminar leaders who are able to engage students in a focused discussion responsive to texts and responsible for information. Without such experience, they are in effect having to invent a whole pedagogy...even as they justify their presence at competitive institutions

which expect publications and service from them. They are having to invent discursive methods of teaching...in a world in which colleagues consider their classes private turf, and may even be unwilling to share their pedagogical inventions" (p. 16).

Overall, current teaching practices in honors courses do not seem to match the optimal learning styles of honors students.

Solutions

To teach honors students in a basic speech-communication course instructors need to capitalize on students' preferred learning styles. Exercises that promote collaboration and participation would seem to provide the best learning experience. The following are a few activities that provide an appropriate environment, since the collaborative style emphasizes group interaction and the participative style recommends discussion in any form as ideal.

Interpersonal - Conflict Group Role-Playing. This exercise allows each group of approximately five members to create a conflict situation and role play it for the rest of the class. Other students are encouraged to discuss causes and solutions with a possibility of doing the activity again

using conflict-management techniques. Different approaches to the situation provide a basis for an assessment of the solutions selected.

Coping With Difficult Situations. Each group of approximately five members is provided with a situation in which they must deliver bad news to a friend. The group must brainstorm possible ways to accomplish the task and arrive at one strategy that seems to be the best way to handle the situation. The results are presented to the entire class; members from other groups are encouraged to critique the solutions of other groups. By combining the ideas of a number of groups, an optimal strategy may be designed.

Dyadic encounter. Students are assigned partners for the purpose of getting acquainted with someone they currently do not know. The assignment allows the students to experience the growth of a new relationship so that they can analyze the elements of interpersonal communication through their unique experience. Five twenty-minute meetings are required over a three-week period; the final product is a paper that anlayzes the experience using the elements of interpersonal communication (from lectures and from the textbook)(Weaver, 1980).

Group dicussion - Coping With Problem Group Members. One person is selected from each group of approximately five members and instructed to return to the group and demonstrate a problem behavior. The discussion continues with each group attempting to deal with the problem-group member. Reports from each group are followed by effective methods for dealing with the problem behavior. This exercise may be repeated with a number of different problem behaviors.

Problem Case Study. Each group of approximately five members is provided with the same case study that requires brainstorming techniques for determining the probable causes of the problem and possible solutions. Each group must follow the same organizational format, arriving at a best solution that will be defended after other groups present their solutions. A class consensus could be a final goal for this discussion.

Problem-Solving Group. In this exercise, each group of approximately five members determines a real problem that exists on campus. The group must come up with a practical solution and implement the solution.

Public speaking - Group Critique of a Demonstration Speech. To acquaint students with critique forms and how to evaluate a speech, allow

the students to critique a video tape of a speech individually and then compare rankings in a group of approximately five students. A consensus within each group must be reached, followed by a comparison with other groups and the instructor.

Group Commercials. The goal of this exercise is to apply a persuasive speech organizational structure to a situation where students to sell a product or service. Divide the class into groups of five with each person taking one part of the Monroe Motivated Sequence (Ehninger, et. at., 1986, pp. 158-164.) in a commercial that they design. While each group presents their commercial, the rest of the class critiques the steps and transitions between the parts of the speech. This exercise can also be used to teach the construction of a speech.

Team Debate. Set up two teams of five students on opposing sides of an issue. Each person gets two minutes to refute the arguments of the opposition and bring up new arguments to support their side. Collaboration between speeches is allowed. This exercise helps provide practice in the extemporaneous mode of speaking, teaches the use of evidence, develops critical thinking skills, and promotes a team atmosphere. The rest of the

students vote for the winning team and may discuss reasons for their decisions if results are divided.

These are just a few examples of ways to adapt teaching approaches to collaborative and participative learning styles. Many more exist and if communication honors classes are to adequately facilitate the goals of honors students, activities adapted to their learning styles need to be implemented.

Summary

This paper reported the results of a case study conducted on two honors sections of a basic speech-communication class. Students indicated a clear preference for collaborative and participative learning styles that can best be accomodated by teaching techniques encouraging participation and activities promoting group interaction among students. Currently, most honors classes do not adapt to these learning styles, using either independent study or lecture methods for disseminating information. Suggestions for appropriate instructional activities in an honors speech-communication course were provided that will match teaching methods with the learning styles of honors students. This will help

speech-communication instructors to better facilitate the needs of honors students in speech-communication courses.

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APPENDIX A

LEARNING STYLES

Independent: This response style is characteristic of students who like to think for themselves. They prefer work on their own but will listen to the ideas of others in the classroom. They learn the content they feel is important and are confident in their learning abilities.

Avoidance: This style is typical of students who are not interested in learning course content in the traditional classroom. They do not participate with students and teachers in the classroom. They are uninterested or overwhelmed by what goes on in classes.

Collaborative: This style is typical of students who feel they can learn the most by sharing ideas and talents. They cooperate with teachers and peers and like to work with others. They see the classroom as a place for social interaction as well as content learning.

Dependent: This style is characteristic of students who show little intellectual curiosity and who learn only what is required. They see teacher and peers as sources of structure and support. They look to authority figures for guidelines and like to be told what to do.

Competitive: This response style is exhibited by students who learn material in order to perform better than others in the class. They feel they must compete with other students in the class for the rewards of the classroom, such as grades or teachers' attention. They view the classroom as a win-lose situation, where they must always win.

Participant: This style is characteristic of students who want to learn course content and like to go to class. They take responsibility for getting the most out of class and participate with others when told to do so. They feel that they should take part in as much of the class related activity as possible and little that is not part of the course outline.